

Hawaiian Studies: A Kumu's Commitment to Keeping It Relevant for Today

When he's not teaching his students in class, Kealalōkahi Losch, Assistant Professor of Hawaiian and Pacific Islands Studies at Kapi`olani Community College, often asks himself, "What are my students missing and what else do they need to know?" It's that kind of introspection and commitment to continuous improvement that keeps his Hawaiian Studies classes fresh and relevant.

"We teach through culture, not teach about culture," Losch explains. "Hawaiian Studies shows how we can live better today."

At a recent class held outdoors next to the relatively new *Māunuuu* student garden on the Kapi`olani Community College campus, Losch, dressed in T-shirt, shorts and rubber boots, led his students on a rigorous intellectual journey, contrasting systems developed by Hawaiians and those of the Western world. He creatively links everything to the present, sharing the ancient Hawaiians' place-based oral traditions with implications for today.

For example, in ancient Hawai`i, everyone was required to devote one day every 10 days in service to ali`i. "If we served government in that way today, how would our society change?" he asks. This leads to a discussion on government spending and the concepts of kuleana (privilege and responsibility) in civic duty.

The intriguing curriculum leads to a greater awareness and appreciation of Hawaiian culture. Most importantly, more are beginning to see its application for today. Hawaiian Studies classes are now a requirement for Hotel/Restaurant Operations and Travel and Tourism students to ensure local culture and values are properly integrated into Hawai`i's visitor industry. Introductory Pacific Islands Studies courses have now been offered at Kapi`olani Community College for nearly a decade. And, after systemwide collaboration across the UH campuses to develop Pacific Islands Studies courses, the Faculty Senate at UH-Mānoa is now considering the creation of a bachelor's degree program in Pacific Islands Studies.

Called to be a Kumu

Losch never thought he would be leading classes in Hawaiian Studies when he was growing up in Kailua. In fact, that was the furthest thing from his mind. After graduating from Kamehameha Schools, he tried to get as far away from Hawai`i as possible. He attended the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in Connecticut to study engineering, following in the military footsteps of his dad, a retired U.S. Army Staff Sergeant.

But fate has a way of redirecting our lives, and before long, Losch found himself back in the Islands.

After resigning his appointment to the USCGA, his dad issued a mandate: get a job and to sign up at Windward Community College. Losch dutifully did both, holding down a full-time job while being a full-time student. It was a Hawaiian culture class at Windward that inspired him to reconnect with his roots.

"I didn't think I needed Hawaiian Studies. I walked away from the Hawaiian stuff," Losch recalled. "But at Windward, I realized that not all of my peers had the same opportunities to learn traditional knowledge growing up."

That realization was the turning point for Losch. Once he transferred to UH-Mānoa, he started working with Hawaiian programs such as Nā Pua No`eau, which was his first opportunity to teach students and realize that he couldn't escape that calling. He went on to graduate from the UH-Manoa with a bachelor's degree in Liberal Studies focused on Pacific Islands Studies and then obtained a master's degree in Pacific Islands Studies as an East-West Center grantee.

Much like his personal journey, Losch's UH career has been one of continual growth. He started as lecturer with one class in Fall 1999 and by Spring 2000 had a full load of classes. In Spring 2001, was a full-time emergency hire; in Fall 2002, he became a tenure-track professor; and by 2006, was tenured.

As with Losch, one of his students, Hilo native Suzie Wong Brealey, who came to KCC after working for seven years with Norwegian Cruise Lines and is now in her third semester at the campus, has also come full circle to reclaim her culture: "I have more respect for my grandparents and family. It was an inner voice that told me I should appreciate this knowledge before it's lost."

UH, The Family Business

There is no doubt that Losch is having a positive influence on students and serving as a guardian to preserve the authenticity of the Hawaiian culture. It's a far cry from the days when he was known merely as "Naomi Losch's son."

Indeed, it was difficult to step out of the shadow of the venerable Kumu Naomi Losch, who has been at the UH system for 40 years. Toward the end of her 10-year employment at the Bishop Museum, she started teaching Hawaiian language at Leeward Community College in 1970, then transferred to UH-Manoa in 1994. Along the way she also started the Hawaiian Language program at Windward Community College.

Naomi Losch was planning to retire in June 2011, but with the new tentative agreement, decided to move up her retirement to the end of this year. Her contributions have left an indelible impression and now the next generation of kumu are carrying on her legacy at the UH system.

Losch's wife, Ku`uipo, whom he met at the UH, also teaches Hawaiian Studies, and has been at Leeward Community College since Fall 2004. Altogether, the three kumu form a formidable team of stewards of Hawaiian culture and language.

The Losches' 2-1/2-year-old daughter, Kala`i, is a participant in Honolulu Community College's early childhood program, so there are now three generations of Losches within the UH system. And there is another Losch on the way, expected to arrive in April.

Sidebar:
Are you Hawaiian?

The open-ended question, “Are you Hawaiian?” is the topic of the final homework assignment for Losch’s students. Losch says he believes that equally important to being Hawaiian by ethnicity is being Hawaiian by citizenship.

“The term ‘aloha `āina’ is misused today,” Losch said. “In its original use, it was not defined as love of the land, but love of the homeland. It is about being Hawaiian at heart, in the sense of being a patriot to a nation.”

Losch’s great great grandfather, Thomas Kirkwood Clarke, refused to acknowledge the Union after the U.S. Civil War ended and relocated from Georgia to the Hawaiian Islands. Clarke married a Hawaiian woman and became an ardent patriot of the Hawaiian Kingdom. As a result of his Royalist stance, the Provisional Government searched his home for ammunition after the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom. His grandson, Alexander Huddy Clarke, Naomi Losch’s father, was one of the 6,000-plus people who voted against Hawai`i’s statehood, preferring to keep Hawai`i a territory to prevent over-development and the influx of outsiders who would change Hawai`i’s culture and society for the worse.

Losch’s personal connection to the past and his understanding of the history and culture of Hawai`i provide rich context for Hawaiian Studies today. And his commitment to honor the patriotism of both his father’s and mother’s families provides an example of how to honor one’s kūpuna as a Hawaiian, regardless of whether or not those kūpuna themselves were Hawaiian.